

## EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA SALUS

It is a dogma of divine faith that the Catholic Church is requisite for salvation. It is also perfectly certain that a man who dies as a non-member of the Church can attain to the beatific vision. Theologians have had to keep both these facts in mind in explaining the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. We can distinguish four basically different explanations offered in modern times.

The first interpretation would state the necessity of the Church for salvation merely in function of our Lord's *command* that all men should enter the society which He established. If this explanation should be accurate, then the proposition *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* would be restricted to mean: "No one who is culpably outside the Catholic Church can be saved."

Actually the Catholic teaching on the necessity of the Church for salvation goes far beyond the truth that a person who is outside the Church through his own fault is not in a position to enter heaven. The Fourth Council of the Lateran teaches that: "There is one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all is saved."<sup>1</sup> The Decree for the Jacobites formulated by the Council of Florence "firmly believes, professes and teaches that none of those not existing within the Catholic Church, neither pagans nor Jews, heretics and schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but that they are going to go into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels unless they become attached to it [the Catholic Church] before the end of life."<sup>2</sup>

Those statements would not be true were the Church necessary for salvation *merely* with the necessity of precept. The necessity of precept concerns only those who are or who should be aware that a commandment exists. The Councils, on the other hand, describe the Church as requisite for all men without exception. Thus, while the Church is really necessary with the necessity of precept, the actual teaching of the Councils shows that it is requisite for salvation in still another way.

A second interpretation of the dogma on the necessity of the Catholic Church would tell us that *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* means merely

<sup>1</sup> DB 430.

<sup>2</sup> DB 714.

that the Church is the *ordinary* means of salvation. Like its predecessor, this explanation falls afoul of the Conciliar pronouncements on the necessity of the Church. The Councils and the other organs of Catholic teaching which have stated the necessity of the Church insist that in some way every person must be connected with or attached to the Church of Jesus Christ in order to achieve salvation. The statement that the Church is the ordinary vehicle of salvation merely takes account of the fact that men who die without being members of the true Church of Jesus Christ may be saved. The fact is unquestioned, but it is not an explanation of the dogma as it appears in the pronouncements of the Church.

The third interpretation is much more common. It asserts that, in order to be saved, a man must belong at least to the *soul* of the Catholic Church. This explanation is preferable to its two predecessors in that it takes account at least of the universal meaning attached to the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. According to the proponents of this interpretation no man whatsoever can be saved unless he belongs in some way at least to the soul of the Catholic Church.

There are sharply different ways of understanding what the term *soul of the Church* means when it is used to explain the truth *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Some use this term to designate the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Those who would "belong to the Soul of the Church" or be "members of the Soul of the Church" in this way would be those who live the life of sanctifying grace which comes to men in the indwelling of the Holy Ghost.

As far as these theologians are concerned, the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* means that there is no salvation for the man who is not at least in the state of grace. Looked on in this way, the axiom would insist upon the necessity of sanctifying grace rather than on that of the Catholic Church. It is difficult to see how this explanation could stand as a fully adequate interpretation of the doctrine set forth by the Fourth Lateran and Florence.

We must remember however that it is by no means totally inadequate. The faith, hope and charity which are the primary expressions of the life of grace are themselves the inward principles of unity within the Catholic Church. The life of sanctifying grace finds its corporate or social functioning only in the activity of the Catholic Church. Since every person who is saved must possess sanctifying grace at the time of death, he must possess a reality which properly belongs to the Catholic Church, and thus, to this extent at least, be connected with

the institution which our Lord founded as the necessary vehicle of salvation.

On the other hand, when a man tries to explain the necessity of the Church for salvation by stressing the connection of the life of grace with the Church, he does not take into account any immediate adherence of the person who is to be saved with the Church as such. The Conciliar pronouncements insist that no man can be saved outside the Church. The theologian who relies on the concept of the soul of the Church simply insists that not only the person who is saved, but the very life of grace itself are sometimes to be found in non-members of the Church. This is perfectly correct, but it is no adequate explanation of the teaching proposed in the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nullus alius*.

Moreover this explanation is subject to disapproval on the grounds of terminology. If we take the soul of the Church to mean either God the Holy Ghost or the life of grace which exists within men as the result of the inhabitation of the Blessed Trinity in their souls, then certainly the expressions "member of the soul of the Church" and "belonging to the soul of the Church" are quite inadmissible. The term "soul of the Church" is metaphorical, and there is an inexcusable mixing of metaphors when a person is described as a "member" of the Holy Ghost, or as "belonging to" the state of grace.

No such difficulty exists of course when another, and an unfortunately all-too-prevalent notion of the soul of the Church is used in explaining the statement *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Theoretically there could be members of a society composed exclusively of persons of good will and in the state of grace, as the soul of the Church is sometimes understood. The persons who utilize this concept interpret the teaching on the necessity of the Church by stating that, in order to be saved, a man must belong either to the body of the Church, which they understand as the actually existing and visible society founded by our Lord, or to the soul of the Church, which is the invisible and spiritual society composed exclusively of those who have the virtue of charity.

No such society, however, exists on this earth. As a result any explanation of the axiom in terms of such a gathering cannot be other than inaccurate. Thus, taken as a whole, the attempt to explain the necessity of the Catholic Church for salvation in the light of the soul of the Church is either unsatisfactory or downright incorrect.

The fourth and traditional manner of explaining the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* uses the terms *in re* and *in voto* or some of the

manifold variations of these expressions. It states that, in order to be saved, a man either be a member of the Catholic Church or *intend to become a member*. Alone among the procedures used to explain the necessity of the Church, this one is perfectly consonant with all the Pontifical and Conciliar pronouncements on the subject. No man whatsoever can be saved without actually willing to live and to die within the Church of Jesus Christ.

Seen in its proper perspective then the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* is a powerful and profound statement of the fact that the charity which is absolutely requisite for eternal life involves a sincere desire to dwell within the Catholic Church which is the House of the Lord. No man can be said to love God with the affection of benevolence or friendship unless he actually wishes to do what God has commanded. Now God wills that men should worship Him, not as scattered and unorganized individuals, but as members of a society which is the Kingdom of God. No man can be said to have charity unless he intends to enter this Kingdom.

Strictly speaking, it is not necessary that the person who has charity should be fully informed about the identity of the true Church of Jesus Christ in this world. Thus it is perfectly possible that a man should intend to live within the Sheepfold of Christ and at the same time not be aware that the Roman Catholic Church is the society he seeks. The error which beclouds his mind does not change his vital orientation. He lives as one possessed of that *amor fraternitatis* which the great Francis Sylvius depicted as the essential factor in the Catholic Church's inward bond of unity.<sup>3</sup> He truly intends to be a member of Christ's Mystical Body.

On the other hand charity is absolutely incompatible with an unwillingness to live and die in the communion of the Church of Jesus Christ. There can be no charity without the *amor fraternitatis* although this latter can and does exist apart from the virtue of charity. Thus every man who has charity, every man in the state of grace, every man who is saved, is necessarily one who is or who intends to become a member of the Roman Catholic Church. There can be no exceptions. This is the only interpretation fully consonant with the Fourth Lateran declaration that outside the Church no one at all is saved. It accords fully with the Florentine pronouncement that members of non-Catholic religious communions and those of no

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Controversiarum Liber Tertius*, q. 1, a. 2, in the *Opera Omnia*, Antwerp, 1698, Vol. V, p. 237.

religious affiliation whatsoever cannot be saved and are going into everlasting fire unless they attach themselves to the Roman Church before they die.

Furthermore it explains the assertion of Pope Boniface VIII in his *Unam Sanctam* to the effect that outside the Catholic Church "there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins."<sup>4</sup> Both the beatific vision and the forgiveness of sins are quite impossible apart from charity. Evidently, according to the Magisterium of the Church, that dynamic factor which enters into the process of justification and into the achievement of the Beatific Vision is something which tends inexorably to bring a man within the actual unity of the Catholic Church. That union is vital and voluntary. On the part of the man who is already within the communion of the Catholic Church, the *amor fraternitatis* demands a willingness to live and die within his own religious society. In the man who is not enrolled among the members of the Church, it produces a real desire to enter and to remain in the true Church. The man who has charity belongs to the Church, at least by intention.

There have been, and unfortunately there still are tendencies to regard the *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* as a doctrine in some way offensive to those outside the Catholic Church. Thus Doctor Karl Adam sees this teaching as "aimed at" non-Catholic religious communions though not directed against the individual members of these societies.<sup>5</sup> These tendencies distort the very meaning of the dogma. Actually the teaching on the necessity of the Catholic Church is the recognition of a divinely revealed truth, to the effect that the love of God which our Lord commanded in His disciples demands the unity of the Catholic Church. In telling men that the Catholic Church is requisite for salvation, God has simply made clear the social and corporate aspect of divine charity.

The thesis *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* is a basic motive principle in Catholic missiology. The Church labors in this world for the very purpose which her divine Founder worked to achieve. The Church acts so that men may have life, and have it more abundantly. For this reason the central and essential activity of the Catholic Church consists in an effort to bring men those factors which are absolutely essential for the attainment of everlasting happiness. So it is that the

<sup>4</sup> DB 468.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Spirit of Catholicism*, Revised Edition, Translated by Dom Justin McCann, O.S.B., New York, Macmillan, 1943, p. 189.

Church works to bring men to believe our Lord's teaching, and to love the Triune God and their fellow men with the true love of charity.

But this very charity, towards which the missionary activity of the Church is necessarily orientated, is a factor which demands the Church itself. The love of charity is as it were out of place in any gathering apart from the Sheepfold of Jesus Christ which is the Roman Catholic Church, since the man who has charity must necessarily intend to live and die within the Church. So it is that, even from the point of view of those who benefit from the missionary activity of the Church, the insistence upon the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* is essentially a recognition of the exigencies of charity.

The missionary who offers his life to carry the faith and the Church to those places where the Church has not as yet been properly established labors to bring men more than the "ordinary means of salvation." He works to bring men to love God, and to offer them the very society which their love for God will demand that they should join. He brings them the society which alone holds authentically and infallibly the doctrine of Christ. He gives his people the opportunity to enter the institution which our Lord wills they should enter.

The missionary works in order that men may possess the only ultimate and eternal happiness available to them. Thus he is motivated by divine charity, seeking the glory of God and the perfect good of men. In exactly the same way he labors to fulfil the exigencies of charity in those among whom he works. He strives to bring them the society which the true love for God demands.

The Holy Father's Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* supports the theologians who have explained the dogma on the necessity of the Catholic Church for salvation by stating that, in order to be saved a man must either be a member of the Church or intend to become a member. "It follows" says Pope Pius XII, "that those who are divided in faith or government cannot be living in one Body such as this, and cannot be living the life of its one divine Spirit."<sup>6</sup> In other words the life of grace, expressed in the perfective act of charity precludes any unwillingness to dwell in the House of God.

According to this traditional interpretation, which first appears in Scholastic theology with the writings of Thomas Stapleton<sup>7</sup> and St.

<sup>6</sup> The NCWC edition, p. 16, no. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Stapleton uses the terms *Mater* and *Sponsa* as names of the Church in demonstrating the necessity of the Church for salvation. "In mystico illo coniugio inter Christum et Ecclesiam, neque Christus sine Ecclesia (ordinarie scilicet, et in voto

Robert Bellarmine,<sup>8</sup> the Catholic Church is requisite for salvation because charity itself is necessary. The sheep of Christ belong within the Sheepfold. It is the will of our Lord that they should really intend to enter the Church, and that their intention should neither be frustrated nor neglected. "And other sheep I have that are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice and there shall be one fold and one shepherd."<sup>9</sup>

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saltem suscipientis, licet non in re semper adiuncta) neque Ecclesia sine Christo generat." (*Principiorum Fidei Doctrinalium Demonstratio Methodica*, Paris, 1579, Controversia IV, Lib. VIII, p. 314.) Stapleton taught that there is no salvation outside the Church because there is no salvation apart from charity and no charity outside the Church. (Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 316.)

<sup>8</sup> St. Robert used the same terminology shortly after Stapleton's book appeared. "Respondeo igitur, quod dicitur, extra Ecclesiam neminem salvari, intelligi debere de iis qui neque re ipsa nec desiderio sunt de Ecclesia, sicut de Baptismo communiter loquuntur theologî. Quoniam autem Catechumeni, si non re, saltem voto sunt in Ecclesia, ideo salvari possunt." (*De Ecclesia Militante*, Cap. III. In the Ingolstadt edition of the Controversies, 1586, Vol. I, col. 1266.)

<sup>9</sup> John 10: 16.

## Answers to Questions

### THE COSTUME OF ALTAR-BOYS

*Question:* It is our custom to dress the altar-boys in red cassocks on festive days and in black cassocks during Lent and at Requiems, while the torch-bearers at High Mass wear white cassocks, with capes and sashes taking the place of surplices. Is there any decree of the Sacred Congregation forbidding this practice or requiring altar-boys always to appear in black cassock and linen surplice?

*Answer:* The only legislation which we have been able to find regulating the costume of altar-boys is a decree of the Sacred Congregation, dated July 9, 1859 (*ad 2*), which forbids the substitution of an alb for the surplice in the dress of sanctuary boys and, moreover, prohibits attiring these *chierichetti* like miniature prelates with *mozzetta*, or red biretta, or prelatial gloves. There seems to be no censure of the use of red cassocks by the boys, since the decree just mentioned names red or black as the color of the *vestis talaris* to be worn by them. Our own preference is for the black cassock and the linen surplice for the boys actively engaged as masters of ceremonies, acolytes, or thurifers, leaving more elaborate and less rigidly liturgical costumes for those who act as torch-bearers or who are present merely as assistants *in choro*.

### THE GOSPEL OF THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

*Question:* I notice that the Gospel of the Second Sunday in Lent repeats the Gospel of the day before, the Saturday of the Spring Ember Week. How is this to be accounted for, since it seems to be a liturgical principle not to read a second time that which has just been recited? For instance, we vary the Suffragium in the office of the Blessed Virgin on Saturdays that we may not repeat her name in it.

*Answer:* The reason for the reading of the Gospel account of the Transfiguration in the Mass of two successive days is a historical one. Originally the Ember Saturday was an aliturgical day, the Mass now said on it not being celebrated till the dawn of Sunday morning at the close of an all-night vigil, the *parvixis*. When the vigil began to be anticipated so that the Mass was celebrated, not after a night-long